Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies
JICS 2025, 1: 268-280
DOI: 10.29329/almamater.2025.1286.17

Exploring the Community Identity of the Bene Israel through their Autoethnographic English Literature: Assessment of Nissim Ezekiel's *Background Casually*, Esther David's *The Walled City* and Robin David's *City of Fear*

Riti Banerjee[1]

Abstract

Indian Jewry is unique for being the only Jewish community never historically persecuted. Among them, the Bene Israel stand out as the largest and most fully integrated Jewish group in India, distinguished solely by their religion. During the British Raj, they migrated from the Konkan countryside to urban centers like Bombay, Pune, and Ahmedabad, assuming middle-class roles. Following India's independence, many emigrated to Israel, where they were officially recognized as "full Jews" in 1964. While much scholarly attention has focused on their origins and Jewish authenticity, exploring their auto-ethnographic literature offers insight into their lived experiences within India's pluralistic society.

Key figures include poet Nissim Ezekiel, whose work reflects his assimilation into cosmopolitan Bombay while grappling with cultural alienation, as seen in his poem *Background, Casually*. Author Esther David provides a female perspective on Bene Israel life in Ahmedabad in *The Walled City*, depicting generational interactions with Jewish and non-Jewish neighbors and the challenges faced by women in minority communities. Her son, Robin David, in *The City of Fear,* examines the community's insecurities amid Gujarat's 2002 violence, highlighting intergenerational shifts in identity. By analyzing these auto-ethnographic narratives, written in distinct political contexts, this study explores the Bene Israel's complex negotiation between their Indian homeland and their longing for Israel, underscoring their efforts to maintain a unique religious identity in 21st-century India.

Keywords: Bene Israel, Auto-ethnographic literature, Jewish identity, Nissim Ezekiel, Esther David

Introduction of Bene Israel Community: A History

Fleeing persecution and political turmoil somewhere around 175 BC, lost in a shipwreck at Arabian Sea, seven men and seven women landed at the coast of a village called Navgaon in Alibaug in the present Kolaba district in Maharashtra. Burying their fellow comrades there, the survivors made their way into the new land they had stumbled upon where they were

[1] M.A., Presidency University, Department of History, Kolkata, India, ritibanerj@gmail.com.

How to cite this article: Banerjee, R. (2025). Exploring the Community Identity of the Bene Israel through their Autoethnographic English Literature: Assessment of Nissim Ezekiel's "Background Casually", Esther David's *The Walled City* and Robin David's *City of Fear*. In: *Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies 2:1*, 268-280.
Submitted: 31.07.2024
Accepted: 28.11.2025

hosted welcomingly by the existing religious communities and they gradually settled down there expanding their own community.

This is the story of origin that the Bene Israel believe in and transmit from one generation to the other. What seems to be the first written reference to the Bene Israel comes from European Christian missionaries who as a part of their colonizing venture tried preaching their religion to the indigenous population of India by attempting to gain a basic understanding of their religious beliefs and practices. One such person was a Danish missionary called J.A. Sartorious who had heard of a rumored community of Jews residing in Surat and Rajapore, who believed in monotheism, practiced circumcision and endogamy and knew nothing of Hebrew except how to recite the *Shema*, claiming that they had lost all their religious books in the shipwreck that had brought them there (Nathan Katz, 2012, p. 3). Sartorious's source of information were Cochin Jews from Madras, part of the earliest settled Jewish community of India whose presence has been ratified by written documents dated as early as 9th to 10th century. Being in close proximity to their co-religionists in Konkan, they must have come into contact with them. Yet unfortunately the earliest written evidence of their interaction comes only in 1768 from a David Rahabi whose letter to the Jews in Amsterdam sought to inform them of the progress of the training that Cochin Jews were providing to their counterparts in Konkan that included teaching them Jewish rituals in Hebrew and familiarizing them with up to date religious practices. Interestingly, grafting this actual incident on a legend of their own, the Bene Israel also claimed that one David Rahabi had already introduced them to Jewish practices as early as the 12th century (Israel, 1982, pp. 18).

But it was only after 1813 when the Royal Charter allowed Christian missionaries to preach their religion freely in India that the Bene Israel really embraced their Jewish identity and embarked on the journey of their evolution from a group of rural oil pressers in Kolaba to urbanized professionals settled in Bombay, Surat and Ahmedabad. In the rural countryside of Maharashtra, the missionaries made copies of the Bible available in Marathi and also introduced people to the English alphabet which opened up vast areas of opportunity for them in British India and initiated their migration to Bombay Presidency (Katz, 2012, pp. 5).[2]The Bene Israel preferred referring to themselves as the children of Israel rather than using the Hebrew term 'Yehudi'. Completely assimilated into the Indian culture, they also dressed up in regional Marathi sarees and dhotis and had no distinct features to distinguish themselves in terms of physical appearance so much so that few of their Indian neighbours were aware of their Judaic roots and used to call them *Shanivar telis* because they took off every Saturday from their traditional occupation of oil pressing for observance of the Sabbath (Israel, 1982, 23). The community drew scholarly attention when Samuel Kehimkar, a Bene Israel himself, wrote a history of his community and an account of their beliefs and observances in 1897 which was however published only in 1937. With his work being acknowledged and discussed in scholastic circles engaged in Indo-Judaic studies, scholars started questioning the authenticity of their Jewishness. Some scholars even noted that the origin myth that Bene Israel propagated was very similar to that of the Chitpawan Brahmins residing in Maharashtra and termed it as

[2] While the men joined the British army, the English educated women of the household took to teaching in convent schools and soon Bene Israel Jews served in middle class professions like doctor, engineer and professors. Though they were not sure of their roots, their devotion to Judaism was laudable.

an attempt of Sanskritization by a group which could not place itself within the caste hierarchy prevalent in India (Katz, 2012, pp. 8-9). When the State of Israel came into existence on August 1948, it had to face its invading neighbors along with the daunting challenge of creating a Jewish nation out of a semi-arid region around the Negev. Driven by the need to find more laboring hands to gear the nation into progress, the Ministry of Immigration was founded in 1948 to help rehabilitate immigrating Jews. Since then, the migration of the Bene Israel to their homeland has increased considerably and their population in India has reduced. Although India officially does not recognize Judaism as a minority religion, the states of Bengal, Maharashtra and Gujarat identify Jews as religious minorities (The Times of Israel, July 2018)[3].

Schneider opines that "culture constitutes a body of definitions, premises, statements, presumptions, propositions and perceptions about the nature of the universe and man's place in it" (Shweder and Levine, 1984, pp. 93). Studying culture has come to occupy an important part in the discipline of anthropology as it is seen as an authentic primary source in the study of a community. Ethnography as a part of examining culture has evolved recently as scholars realized that a person living within the community would be a better informant of even the smallest details than an outside observer ever could. A piece of written literature is a reflection of the thoughts and ideas of its author. Thus, when it is written from an ethnographic perspective, it mirrors the aspirations and ideas of a whole community. Mapping the historical anthropology of such writings of the Bene Israel community whose ambiguous history leads them to be torn between an indigenously acquired cultural identity and an essentially foreign religion they call their own, shall be rewarding in understanding the experience and cultural identity of a marginal community through the lens of their own literature in India's changing social contexts.

A Poet's Search for His Muse: Nissim Ezekiel and Bombay in *Background, Casually*

Born to rationalist Bene Israel parents in the rapidly urbanizing metropolis of Bombay in 1924, Nissim Ezekiel was to become one of the most prolific Indian poets in the English language decades later. Attending a missionary school in the city along with students from other religious communities, Nissim had plenty of opportunity to interact with different belief systems right from his childhood which contributed to his cosmopolitan outlook.[4] The Bene Israel community in Bombay was one of the first to gain access to the growing facilities of the rising metropolis as they had started migrating to the city as early as the late 18th century. They built their first synagogue, Shaar Harahamim in 1786 surrounding which the Jews built their community life. After his parents acquired some stability in their career, Nissim moved with his family to The Retreat which was an area inhabited by the middle classes of most of the minority communities residing in Bombay like the Parsis, Jews, Muslims and Christians. As a community that has lived through most of the political events in Bombay both during colonial

[3] This has entitled members of the Bene Israel community both in Mumbai and in Ahmedabad today to certain welfare measures of the Government instituted for members of officially recognized minority religions in India. JTA, " Indian state grants minority status to its Jewish community", The Times of Israel, 10 July , 2018, https://www.timesofisrael.com/indian-state-grants-minority-status-to-its-jewish-community/

[4] Nissim attended the Antonio D' Souza High School under the jurisdiction of the Gloria Church (R.Raj Rao , 2016, pp. 21-22).

rule and post-independence period, the Bene Israel have had little to participate in them due to their microscopic numerical strength and their careful avoidance of any political conflict to prevent being targeted and to promote and uplift their lifestyle as a community. The same is reflected in Ezekiel's writings as he did little to address any political problems in his work just like other published Bene Israel authors before him like Bahais Joseph Talkar or M.D. Talkar. Yet Nissim had not actively refrained from politics altogether. In college, he was attracted to M. N. Roy's 'leftist' ideology and especially supported his approval of the English fight against fascism during World War II while Gandhi and the Congress was more invested in the independence movement. Not coming from a conservative Jewish background, he also decided to follow in Roy's footsteps of atheism which he would later abandon but he remained a secular person throughout his life (R. Raj Rao, 2016, pp. 41-42).

Growing up, Ezekiel had loved reading poetry and in college he chose to pursue an honors degree in English Language. After his graduation in 1945, he flew to London to study philosophy where he was influenced by Elliot and Pound's theory of modern English.[5] While in London, he had already started working on his poetry which was to be published in 'A Time to Change' (1952). Most of Ezekiel's early work revolved around searching an identity among different generalized landscapes usually rooted in an urban lifestyle in Bombay (R. Raj Rao, 2016, pp. 37)[6]. Himself dabbling in different occupations ranging from a newspaper editor, an art critic and a professor in English in search for a satisfactory answer to his inner complexities, he tried to portray the complex realities of Indian life in a simplified manner. Perhaps he thought a better way to pursue that would be to introduce a new form of English in his poetry which he noticed was very peculiar to the English-speaking Indian population. He used this style in some of his poems in the Hymns in Darkness anthology published in 1976. While some literary critics opined that it was an unnecessary satire and declined the quality of his work, his biographer R. Raj Rao says that it was Ezekiel's way to fit into the Indo Anglican school with his contemporary poets who were usually bilingual.[7] To compensate for his lack of Marathi skills he resorted to writing in Indian English which allowed him at once to look at Indian society objectively and embrace his own Indianness by vouching for his familiarity with the wider Indian public in the torrid world of Bombay.

Ezekiel wrote 'Hymns in Darkness' after he had decided to become a believer post his LSD trip in 1967 and is one of his later publications (R. Raj Rao, 2016, pp. 233). This 16 poem anthology imitated the technique of the Old Testament and included poems about love, religion and Bombay. Although in earlier poems like 'A Short Story', 'First Theme and Variations', 'Marriage' and 'Case Study' he had shown snippets of his life, in Background Casually in all of 75 lines he summed up his entire experience growing up as a Jew in India, his adult life struggling to settle down in a stable job and his old age where he was able to

[5] He was a fellow at the Wilson College in London.

[6] Along with other Bombay based poets who wrote in English like Adil Jussawalla, Dom Moraes and the likes, Nissim Ezekiel was considered to be one of the earliest pioneers of the 'Bombay school' of poems which talked about life in the city.

[7] Anita Desai opined that the volume was a failed experiment as Ezekiel did not seem to be 'at home' with the theme. John Beston's review considered the title poem 'Hymns in Darkness' to be the most ambitious among all the other poems in the anthology.

embrace his identity as he looked upon his life in retrospect.[8] This is one of the very few poems where he actually asserted his Jewish identity and narrated his experience of growing up as a member of a minority community in India.

The poem begins when Ezekiel addresses himself as the 'poet-rascal-clown' who right from his childhood lacked in physical strength. In his convent school he says, his Christian friends accused him of deicide while he was afraid of his Muslim friend who had boxed his ear and of his Hindu classmates whose poor English grammar repelled him. Although we can easily dismiss these events saying that none of this held true meaning in childhood when children are often misinformed and unaware of their wrong doings, we have to accept how in spite of receiving a similar education in the same academy, the children were aware of their distinct religious backgrounds and belief systems which often demarcated invisible lines between innocently forged childhood friendships. Unable to make sense of religious practices of his own Jewish community which did not fit the narrative of the religious majority he grew up with, he questioned his own morals and embarked on a futile search of finding a meaning to his life by exploring ideas of different religious systems that the pluralistic Indian landscape had to offer him. As a part of it he travelled to England where 'philosophy, poverty and poetry' were his 'three companions' and from where he journeyed back to India on a cargo ship due to lack of finances. Returning with new knowledge helped him to see through some things yet it also gave rise in him an acquired disgust from his father at the way Hindus conducted themselves. Here the word Hindu has been deliberately used instead of Indians to show that in a majority ruled religiously diverse India, it was still the majority that defined and represented the larger population.

In a bid to 'settle down' in his middle-ages he got married and found a 'stable' job yet he realized all these years of experience had still left him a 'fool', a fool who was yet to experience much of his life's journey. Now he recalls his heritage and narrates the journey that the Bene Israel community went through, once considered outcasts to the Indian caste system due to their occupation as oil pressers in rural India to serving the British State during Boer War and settling down as an estranged population in the city of Bombay (R. Raj Rao, 2016, pp. 237).[9] Drawing on his history, he comes to terms with his personal identity the best expression of which he himself believes is his poetry where he can make sense of his inner psychological conflicts as well the 'outer storms' he had to face in life. In the last part of the poem he explains how although the Indian landscape 'sears his eyes' with all its problems staring naked at him and making him feel like an outsider, he has committed himself to the city with all its faults and backwardness. Even when other members of his community have travelled to some foreign land and tried convincing him to join them there, he chooses to become a part of India which is as much a part of his struggle with identity as his inspiration. In poetry he finds his home and in India is his permanent abode where in spite of his spells of alienation, he has found his inspiration from the dynamic and diverse life around him. Ezekiel's love for India is further justified when he defends his country from Naipaul's harsh criticism in 'An Area of

[8] While in the first two poems he employed third person narrative, in the latter two he used first person narrative forthright to talk about himself.

[9] This part is also reflective of Nissim's grandfather, Samuel Haskelji's service for the British State in India during the Boer War. He contrasts this with his career in poetry which he chooses as his own vocation.

Darkness' where he perceives India to be a mishmash of mutinies and irremediable backwardness (Ezekiel, Journal of South Asian Literature, 1976, pp. 193 – 205). The Indian poet objects by saying that although he is a 'natural outsider' to the country owning to his Jewish heritage, it was his circumstances and the conscious choices he made that rendered him an Indian, a part of a modern India which even after putting Ezekiel's religious identity in a flux with all her vicissitudes allowed our poet to finally reconcile his Jewishness with his Indianness.

The Other Half of the Sky: A Woman's Perspective of the Bene Israel Community Through Esther David's *The Walled City*

Esther David was born in Ahmedabad in 1945. Once the heart of a flourishing colonial trade network, it was home to several communities. The lucrative cotton trade and other ancillary opportunities of work that arose in Ahmedabad, attracted the Bene Israel from Bombay who now started settling down here starting from the late 19th century onwards. One of the first synagogues in the city, the Maghen David, was built by Dr. Samuel Erulkar in 1934. Although they had spread out to other emerging centers around Gujarat like Surat, Junagadh, Rajkot etc. they were mostly concentrated in Ahmedabad.

Being brought up in a non-conservative Jewish family, a young Esther David often could not understand Jewish rituals and found herself out of place in the synagogue. As Esther says in her interview with me, her sources of information about her roots was derived from their huge family library, her grandmother who narrated stories of their family and her cook Mani who fed her with Indian folk stories and culture (Esther David, Interviewed by Riti Banerjee, April 2022). Growing up, Esther David studied sculpture at the MS University in Vadodara and held exhibitions of her own artwork, simultaneously writing as an art critic for columns in well-known magazines.[10] An art critic too, Nissim Ezekiel was one of Esther's greatest inspiration and she reminisces how they had conversations about the uniqueness of Indian Jews in the sense that they 'experienced cross cultural conflicts in a multi-cultural country like India', but as Jews had never faced any persecution (David, Interview by Riti Banerjee, April 2022) .Yet she always felt that her art confined her to a block of wood and she wished to be a storyteller which she somewhat fulfilled by narrating short accounts of Bene Israel life across Ahmedabad in newspapers or public forums. While doing her ethnographic research work, she realized she knew little of her own community and decided to dive deeper in her search which culminated in her first novel *The Walled City* in 1994. The novel holds a very special place in her heart as she herself says that in it she finally found her homeland (Esther David, 2009, pp. 1-11). She further says that in writing it, she used Ahmedabad as the theatre and their synagogue as her sub stage where she gave life to her characters and fictionalized them, thus establishing a permanent connection between the Jewish life in the sanctuary of the synagogue and the bustling city outside (David, Interview by Banerjee, April 2022). The commitment to his city, Bombay, that Nissim accepted in 'Background, Casually', was embraced by Esther in her novel *The Walled City*.

[10] She worked in the Ahmedabad Times, Femina Gujarat etc. as an art critic. "Esther David: Biography", Accessed on April 7, 2022, www.estherdavid.com.

The novel opens in the busy neighbourhood of Dilli Darwaza in Ahmedabad in the 1940s where people from different religious and working-class backgrounds live together and cater to each other in their needs. The big courtyard in the narrator's house is lent out by her uncle to both her best friend Subhadra's Hindu family and their Muslim neighbor Hasmukh for his social programmes. They have employed Mani and Fatima as their household helps who have as much influence on her as any other member of the family. Yet, as the narrator grows up, she gradually comes to see through these seemingly friendly interactions as the same walls that had for so long held together her small and ideal world now set up boundaries of religion, caste and gender between the secure 'walled city' she dreamt which had now transformed into the 'walled city' that shackled her to societal norms.

The narrator's struggle with her religious identity, being a member of a marginal minority community, has featured throughout the novel. The line has been drawn between innocent childhood friendships when Subhadra hesitates to put 'chandan' (sandalwood paste) on the narrator's forehead which 'burns for the coolness of sandalwood paste' or when Subhadra's mother does not permit the 'meat- eating narrator' to enter their kitchen which houses their family deity even though it is these vegetarian Gujarati dishes that she craves for in spite of her mother's strict prohibition to not have it or when Subhadra has to 'run back to her house' for just a glass of water. The young girl feels guilty 'for the ways of her ancestors' which alienate her from her best friend and it does not take her much time to realize "We are different" (David, 2009, pp. 27).

Her identity crisis intensifies when she sees finds familiarity with the Hindu deities which look and dress just like her people. Like any typical Bene Israel family, their men are dressed in turbans and fez caps coupled with well-knit suits while women usually wore saris and accompanying jewellery [11]. After a forbidden visit to the temple with Subhadra, when she sits with her *Children's Illustrated Bible* at home little does she relate with the foreign figures on the pages. Rather she finds its storyline similar to the Hindu mythology of Lord Krishna who is easily known to her through her school textbooks, which even though affiliated to a Christian board follows the syllabus set by the narrative of the majority (David, 2009, 29). What she found more fascinating about Subhadra's religion was that she knew and understood her rituals and prayers. The narrator did not understand anything of the Hebrew prayers that were said at the synagogue and often felt out of place there, much like the young Esther did. Hence, she tried to fit into Subhadra' standards, to her she was the perfect example of an ideal girl who was sure of her beliefs and of her affiliation to a particular social identity. Little did she then realize that Subhadra was never given the opportunity to explore beyond the identity she was attested at birth. The narrator's illusion is soon broken when Subhadra commits suicide after she is forced by her parents to discontinue her studies and enter into an arranged marriage (David, 2009, pp. 40-44). The young Esther suddenly grows up to realize, what according to her women seem to realize a little too early, that the fate of the woman does not change, whatever her religious affiliation. She is the body over which men in a patriarchal society practice their religious discourse on, and the 'model' person of whom it is expected to meet all the social norms set for her. She had observed the same with her working mother, Naomi,

[11] Esther David tells us that the men adapted suit as a traditional wear due to the influence of the British whose support they always wanted in win to gain opportunities in a colonialist economy.
David, 2009, p.100.

who was derided by other female members of the household for ignoring her familial obligations. Ironically, it was this same Naomi who in turn made sure that her daughter conformed to all the rules set by the Jewish religion she was born into. It is only in the later part of the story that we come to know that her stress on strict implementation of religious norms was a conservatism that was rooted in insecurity and hatred she had for her father's (Daniel) Hindu mistress, Durga, with whom he had eloped, driving his wife, Leah, to suicide. Traditionally, women are considered either pure or evil (Kramer, 2004, pp. 28). For Naomi, Durga was the epitome of evil, a representation of the sensuous Hindu woman who would entice men with their seduction. Thus, she wanted to protect her daughter from all kind of immodest influences and interactions and thought it best to bring her up the in the religious ways of Judaism. Her religion, to her, was her save haven, from the all-consuming Hindu canvass that surrounded her.

Yet when Leah was betrayed by Daniel and her own religion had failed her, she left no stone unturned to bring him back to her and even took recourse to well-known Hindu religious superstitions. Be it the famous Pir's 'dargah' or the famed Banyanbaba whom everyone revered irrespective of their religious faith, Leah was evoking all supernatural forces that were available to her (Esther David, 2009, pp. 60)[12]. Similarly, after Subhadra's death, in her own emotional journey to cope with the tragic accident, the narrator had sought comfort in a hanuman idol that she made out of clay herself and worshipped. To a teenage girl who had just lost one of her closest friends, her God was what she personalized and tried to make her own.

Besides these instances which show the all-pervading nature of the religion of the majority on the emotions of a minority, Esther also shows that in their linguistic vocabulary too, Hindu as well as Muslim influences are apparent. The narrator's granny insists prioritizing learning Marathi, not Hebrew, over their local Gujarati dialect to remind them of their roots. She also used Marathi Hindu terms like 'deval' and 'deva' for the Jewish synagogue and their deity, and the Urdu word 'namaaz' to refer to their prayers (Esther David, 2009, pp. 86).

As the narrator grows up with her mother imposing values of self-reservation on her, she is more attracted to the colorful tales of Krishna and his 'Rasleela' where young love blooms and is celebrated as part of an annual religious custom (Esther David, 2009, pp.76). Falling head over hills for a boy from the Baghdadi community, she compares him with this playful Indian deity. Reality kicks in when her Granny informs her that such a fair boy from the Baghdadi community would never risk it to be seen with a dark-skinned girl like her from the Bene Israel community. Indian affinity for fairer skin tone has added to the racial discrimination that the Baghdadi community themselves once implemented to prove their similarity to the English colonizers and their distance from dark skinned Indians including their coreligionists in Maharashtra, the Bene Israel.

However much she tried to fit herself into the larger fabric of the Hindu narrative, she was faced with situations which pointed to her how little people knew of her religious background. At a wedding with Pratibha's family which was very different from Bene Isarel ones, where the narrator was an active participant, someone singled her out as 'different' from others. Although the matter was resolved with Pratibha's family reassuring her that she was 'one of

[12] In fact, in the story, it was Leah's Muslim neighbours Shilaben and Hasina who had suggested they visit the local famed Hindu ascetic 'Banyan-baba' whose 'spells' are always effective.

them', when Pratibha had later asked her, 'What are you, if you are not a Hindu, Muslim or Parsi?' the narrator was in a fix with her limited source of knowledge about their ambiguous history. In trying to explain herself better to Pratibha whose religion offered a pictorial representation of a multiplicity of Gods, narrator had equated her imageless God with a Hindu 'Sadhu' (Esther David, 2009, 77).

The novel was published in 1997, after the beginning of communal unrest in Gujarat in 1992 with the demolition of Babri Masjid, which transformed Ahmedabad from the land of Gandhi into a land of bloodshed overnight. Although the narrator's family was protected from any direct influence of the violence, parts of her life started crumbling – Mani's husband was murdered, one of her distant cousins went missing and their family was suffering financially due to the curfews imposed. Many of her relatives, realizing they have no future in India, left for Israel, diminishing the already dwindling numbers of their community. The narrator, though, stayed in Ahmedabad because she had made her place here. Her search for identity was over as the brutality of religious fanaticism was laid bare before her. She understood, while on the one hand, faith could provide comfort like it sheltered her Granny and her Mother, on the other it could be vicious, deliberately shackling you to chains for the way you were born, based on your gender or your caste or suffocate you for the different opinions or beliefs you hold. It is as if this continuous monologue of the narrator was self-reflections of Esther David herself, who had lived a life of varied experiences, being a female follower of an old monotheistic religion in the land of an even more ancient one with multiple deities with their own set of faiths and disciples. Even after a life of its own burden of lived experiences, the narrator decides to stay on in this country, just like Esther David, who decides to nurture the last living legacy of the dwindling community.

Locating Marginal Minorities During Communal Violence: Ahmedabad in 2002 Through the Eyes of Robin David as Seen in His *City of Fear*

Robin David's *City of Fear* follows the tail-end of his mother's *The Walled City* as it traces his experience as a member of the microscopic minority Jewish community in Ahmedabad during the violent outbreak of communal violence in Godhra in 2002. As a journalist with the Times of India during that time, he also gives us a different perspective to the religiously charged atmosphere of Ahmedabad amidst the State imposed curfew. On one of his press tours, the day after a train carrying 'kar sevaks' returning from Ayodhya had been burnt down which had sparked statewide unrest, Robin's press car was stopped by an armed mob. They were asked about their religious affiliation, not apparent from their physical appearance and the crowd was convinced that their driver was Muslim, because according to them, "All drivers are Muslims" (David, 2007, 41). They only managed to get away by reaffirming the mob that they were 'Hindu' by chanting the now war cry of Hindu nationalists 'Jai Shree Ram' and promising to 'defend' their Hindu faith which was under attack from the Muslims. What shocked Robin more was the familiarity of all these faces he had often encountered all around Gujarat and the similarity between them all that made them look like one body of hatred spewing snake with many heads.

His mother, Esther, was faced with a similar situation when she was passing through the same slums of Guptanagar she had walked through her entire life when people suspected her of

being a Muslim for wearing Khaki pants and 'dupatta' (David, 2007, 127). Such stereotypes were being reinforced more than ever before which made them 'feel like refugees' in their own city. In this religiously charged Gujarat which saw its people divided into a broad dichotomy of only Hindus and Muslims as two homogeneous religious monoliths, where would the minority communities such as the Jews place themselves? This was the same question that both Robin and his mother asked themselves when they felt a sense of relief wash over them that they were 'not Muslims' when faced with placed in sudden religiously hostile situations but immediately plunged into sense of guilt (David, 2007, 88). Discussions held with certain people further aggravated his confusion of locating himself. When his uneducated barber, Rameshbhai, who had no knowledge of the Jews before Robin informed had him, concluded that all the problems revolving around Muslims today had evolved from them as they had been their ancestral religion, it left Robin in a fix (David, 2007, 175-177). Elaborate conversations with his 'educated' Hindu professor friend Jayendrasinh seemed similar as he expected Robin to be aggressively anti-Muslim because of his roots in Israel. When he refused to agree to his convoluted nationalist logic of how Muslims were trying to take over India by overpopulating the country and that they were now receiving the much 'deserved' violence, he was labeled 'pseudo-secular', a term which in communal India has come to mock liberalists going against the rabid ideas of the Hindutva discourse and is thought to be synonymous with being an anti-nationalist Pakistani spy. [13] When Robin had insisted that in a mob he would always be recognized and targeted as a Muslim due to his circumcised penis, Jayendrasinh had refused to believe him by stressing that he was 'different' than the other 'bandia' guys (David, 2007, 100-103).

The unrest took a pugnacious turn when a woman was stripped and murdered in broad daylight. Geetaben, as she was called after her marriage to a Muslim man, made her an easy target of the bloodthirsty Hindu mob (Robin David, 2007,123-125). The woman's body once again became the symbol of a whole community, desecrating which was seen as a blow to the whole Muslim community. The lack of police surveillance that day revealed the State endorsed nature of the violence and it was clear to this small Jewish family in Guptanagar, that they would not find help where they usually sought for. With this incident, Guptanagar which was situated adjacent to the Muslim settlement of Juhapura was transformed into a hotbed of conflict as every day false alarms were spread of an impending Muslim attack and angry Hindu mobs pointed their arms at invisible Muslim attackers. Thus, the Davids began a search for their new home. The concept of 'home' had always been very elusive to the Bene Israel families in Ahmedabad and especially to the Davids as they had undertaken several failed attempts to return to their Promised Land. Their stay in Isarel was not at all what Esther had dreamt of and instead of feeling inclusive in an all-Jewish land, they were excluded from social events such as weddings for not following daily Jewish rituals astutely.[14] Soon, their hearts yearned for their own corner in Guptanagar they knew so well.

---

[13] Jayendrasindh talks about a nationalist logic we are much well aware of in religiously charged contemporary India. Imposing the term 'pseudo secular' on a reasonable thinker is supposed to silence the opposing voice of reason to their fantastical logic (David, 2007, p. 100).

[14] Their orthodox Jewish neighbor Amy refused to have meals with them at the same table as they did not follow Kosher rules properly. She had also 'forgotten' to call them to her wedding which flocked their mind with a lot of questions about the authenticity of their Jewishness in regular practices (Robin David, 2007, 64).

This task of finding a new home in riot-ridden Ahmedabad was more challenging than they had expected. Although initially they were refused tenancy in a complex for being 'meat esters', they found some options in some financially wealthier areas away from Guptanagar. The move took a toll on them emotionally as they were leaving behind them many fond memories of the past. The shift to their new flat was not without questions. Soon their present seemingly wealthy and 'refined' neighbours began to enquire of the 'mezuzah' on their door and also questioned the faith they belonged to. Even when Miss David explained their Jewish origins, they were not able to erase the tag of 'being Muslims' even away from Guptanagar, as some uninformed neighbours outside the complex claimed that both they and the Parsi family that had moved next door were 'Muslims' (Robin David, 2007, pp. 237). To them, any ritualistic practices alien to their own faith was supposed to be 'Muslim' and thus was to be deemed to be a threat. Only the financial affordability of people had changed, the irrational fear of the Muslim community had remained, realized Robin. This perceptible attitudinal change towards minorities was to become the ruling for years to come, thereby heightening the vulnerabilities of the marginalized communities which alienated them further.

After an impending 'rath yatra' procession was 'successfully' handled by the State in the sense that the pilgrims who were ordered to be unarmed were given complete protection from any 'alien' intervention, the unrest was thought to have 'died down'. Esther David decided to go back to their half-empty house at Guptanagar, to cling on to the last remnants of nostalgia that it held. But Robin's refusal to return to his ancestral residence at Guptnagar reflects his realization that beneath the din and bustle of the apparently multicultural city lay a sleeping monster of communal hatred ready to rear its ugly head, at the slightest provocation, real or imaginary. Once this hatred was allowed to be pandered by the state in a majoritarian discourse, the tiny but significant space that minorities like Jews occupied began to be squeezed and their sense of belonging was replaced by a state of despondency. Thus, at the end of the memoir, Robin sits uneasily with the deliberate self- effacement of his past and seeks anonymity to start a new life where he thinks he would have the power to rewrite an identity which would give him a fleeting sense of security in a communally charged India where collective animus is the new normal.

Conclusion

The Bene Israel Jews in India - A community not familiar to most, much less written or talked about than in exclusive scholarly articles. Followers of a religion not known indigenously to be cultivated in the country they claim to be their Motherland. A group which completely blends with a pluralistic Indian culture yet refuses to give up their 'borrowed' religious identity completely. The ignorance of their practising faith while sometimes allowing them to situate themselves within the niche of any religion, sometimes threatens their existence in a religiously charged India. This simultaneous belonging and alienation manifests itself in the three auto ethnographical narratives I have examined. Produced in different timelines, cities and political scenarios in India, their cultural encounters might have been different, yet their desire for a homeland seems to transcend these differences. While Nissim Ezekiel navigates life in Bombay through his poems and finally acknowledges his place in it by coalescing his religious background with his cultural identity, Esther David takes us through the identity crisis she faced being placed in a narrative set by the majority in a country, all the while searching for a

faith that could shelter all her insecurities which were intensified by the rising tension between the Hindus and the Muslims in post 1992 Ahmedabad. Robin David looks at a completely changed city in 2002 where instead of the usual curiosity at the mention of their faith there is a complete refusal to acknowledge their independent existence and a tendency to align them with any of the two dichotomous monolithic religions the state had been deliberately divided into. Throughout this experience, his search for a safe abode is kept up and when he finally finds one, he decides to chart out his own course and redefine his path rather than let his religious faith define it. With a forgotten history, most of which is scoured from oral traditions, their failure to situate themselves perfectly in Israeli or Indian traditions comes naturally, but most often they find themselves settling down in the pluralistic Indian landscape which when not threatened allows them to retain their unique religious identity as well as gives them a sense of belonging in a multicultural India. The ethnographic writings I have examined helped its creators to redefine this permanent abode in India as they explore and embrace their identity through their own creations. Esther David perfectly sums it up when she tells me about the process of writing her novel, "…the small space within the synagogue and the bustling city outside the sanctuary of Jewish life becomes the theatre of my life and literature."

References

David, Esther. (2009). The Walled City. Delhi: Westland Ltd.

David, Esther. (2022, April 22). Interview by Riti Banerjee. Interview through Gmail.

David, Robin. (2007). City of Fear. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publishers.

Ezekiel, Nissim. (1976). Background, Casually. In Hymns in Darkness. Oxford University Press.

Secondary Sources:

Esther David: Biography. (2022, April 7). Esther David. Retrieved from www.estherdavid.com.

Ezekiel, N. (1976). Naipaul's India and Mine. Journal of South Asian Literature, 11(1), 193- 205.

Israel, B. J. (1982). The Jews of India. New Delhi: Centre for Jewish Interfaith Studies.

JTA. (2022, July 10). Indian state grants minority status to its Jewish community. The Times of Israel. Retrieved from https://www.timesofisrael.com/indian-state-grants-minority-status-to-its-jewish-community/

Katz, Nathan. (2012). An Identity Transformed. In Who are the Jews of India? (California Scholarship Online, pp. 3). https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520213234.001.0001

Kramer, Laura. (2004). The Sociology of Gender. New Delhi: Rawat Publications.

Levine, R. A., & Shweder, R. A. (1984). Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rao, R. R. (2016). The Authorized Biography of Nissim Ezekiel. Pune: Vishwakarma Publications.

Glossary

'Bandia'- A Hindi slang used for those with a circumcised penis.

'Chandan' – Sandalwood paste which is often used in Hindu rituals, usually applied on the forehead of devotees.

'Deval' – The Marathi word for 'temple'.

'Deva' –The Marathi word for 'God'.

'Dupatta' – A piece of cloth worn around the head or neck by Indian women.

Goddess Durga – She is the embodiment of the powerful female deity (shakti) in the Hindu pantheon. Worshipped in various forms, she is also considered to be the Goddess of prosperity and peace in family life.

Hindutva Ideology – An ideology seeking to establish the hegemony of Hinduism and Hindus in India by foregoing the nation's pluralistic and secular culture.

Indo Anglican School of literature – Indo Anglican school of literature refers to contributions to literature by Indian authors in the English language.

'Kar Sevaks' – The disputed land of Ayodhya which is considered to be the birthplace of the Hindu mythological figure Ram is referred to as Ram *Janmabhoomi* by Hindu nationalists. In 1990, some of these political parties claimed that the Ram Temple be built on those grounds. Kar Sevaks are a group of people who have pushed this demand to build the Ram temple in Ayodhya for years. On Decemeber 6, 1992, in a rally at Ayodhya, a group of *kar sevoks* razed the Babri Masjid to the ground, a moment that redefined modern Indian politics.

Lord Krishna – One of the most widely revered Hindu deities, considered to be the proponent of the Bhagvad Gita and the eight incarnations of the Hindu God Vishnu, the protector of the Universe.

'Mezuzah' – A parchment with religious text hung on the doorstep of a Jewish house to express good faith.

'Namaaz'- It is the obligatory prayer performed by a practicing Muslim five times a day.

'Rasleela' – Rasleela is a part of the mythology of Krishna where this playful deity is seen dancing with his lover Radha and her gopis (friends). Today it is observed as a tradition in India to celebrate Krishna's youth and blossoming love.

'Rath Yatra'- A Hindu ceremonial process with a chariot centered in the middle where the deity of image of the central deity is mounted.

Royal Charter 1813- The Charter Act of 1813 ended the East India Company's trade monopoly in India and established the sovereignty of the Crown over the Company. It also made provisions for the missionaries to come to India and engage in proselytization.

Sadhu – A Hindu ascetic.

'Shanivar Teli' – Literally translating to 'Saturday oil pressers' in English from Marathi, the Bene Israel were given this name because of their traditional occupation in the district of Kolaba in Maharashtra. As they took every Saturday off from their work to read the Sabbath, they were known by this name amidst the local Marathi population.

'Shema' – Shema is the beginning couple of lines from the book of Deuteronomy which became an important part of prayers in ancient Israelite tradition. "Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone", says the first lines of Deuteronomy 6:4. The word 'Shema' in Hebrew translates to 'Listen' in English. Today the *Shema* has become an important part of Jewish ritualistic tradition.

'Yehudi' – The Biblical Hebrew term used to refer to the ancient people from the kingdom of Judah in ancient Israel. Today it is used to refer to people professing faith in Judaism.